

INTENSE FEELING OF GUILT

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Some time back an unknown woman phoned me. She asked me, “Fr. Varghese, can I come to you for my confession?” She has heard or read somewhere about confession. Confession in the Catholic Church is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For Catholic Christians confession is one of the seven sacraments. In Gujarati confession is also called ‘the Sacrament of Penance.’

The lady caller requested, “Father, can I come to you for my confession?”

From her question I understood that the caller is not a Catholic Christian. If she is a Catholic, then she would know that she can come to me even without asking. So I talked with her as a person of another faith.

I have written about confession at least twice and my articles have been published in DOOT magazine. First, I had written “Face to Face Confession” and it was taken from DOOT as a chapter in my first Gujarati book “Jivan Patolama Dharmani Bhat” published by Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand. So here instead of repeating what I have written in the past, I will explain the Sacrament of Reconciliation in today’s context and tell the person of another faith that she can meet me or other confessor for a session of counseling. For, real confession involves deep faith in Jesus as God who forgives and reconciles with each person.

Talking with the woman caller I understand that she is deeply feeling guilty of her sins. In such a situation a Catholic Christian man or woman may approach a priest for confession and get reconciled with God receiving appropriate counseling and spiritual guidance. Without this clear understanding of confession I guessed that the unknown woman called me to hear her confession.

A person with clear understanding of his/her sin and with a repentant heart approaches a priest as a representative of Jesus Christ and acknowledges his/her sins and failures. The repentant sinner is not only sorry for his/her sins but he/she is firmly resolved to sin no more and keep away from sinful situation. A Catholic Christian approaches a priest with such disposition.

Gandhiji in his autobiography “Experiments with Truth” gives the beautiful example of his deep guilt feelings and his repentance. As a teenager Mohandas

smoke 'biedi', ate meat and did stealing. For such sins Mohandas felt deep feelings of guilt. Gandhiji felt so sad and fearful about his sins that he was not able to tell about them to anyone. The burden of sin was so heavy on him and his companion in sin that he wrote in his autobiography: "We even decided to commit suicide" (Satyana Prayogo, Navjivan Trust, 2006, p. 22)

It was good that Gandhiji listened to his inner voice that he acknowledged all his sins listing them on a piece of paper and gave it to his sick father to read with tears in his eyes. Then, falling at the feet of his father Gandhiji wept acknowledging his sins and promising his father never to commit such offences. In confession a penitent resolves firmly never to commit the same sin which has been confessed.

I do not know how the lady caller understood sin and confession. The Sacrament of Confession is only for Christians who know about it. But I do believe that, the lady caller also can avail herself the counseling of a priest and rid herself of her deep feeling of guilt with appropriate advice and guidance of a priest. If she feels comfortable she can approach a priest; or a professional counselor for guidance.

A person who believes in God, the faith itself provides appropriate ambient and guidance. Christians call God as Father or Daddy and recognizes themselves as the children of God. I know that my Muslim brothers have difficulty to call God as Father. Sometimes back I remember reading a book in English. The book by a Muslim lady, Bilkis Sheikh, is about her experiences of converting into Christian religion and its consequences. The title of the book is "I Dared to Call Him Father."

In this autobiographical book, Bilkis Sheikh explains her experiences of inner peace amidst the challenges which she faced and the perils which she encountered in accepting God as her Father. She tells that Christianity is a religion of relationship among the Christians and of relationship with God the Father.

As the Bible says Christians accept God the Father as the God of love. Jesus Christ in his whole life propagated the message: God is our Father, and we (all human persons) are the children of one and same God. When we sin, we are conscious that we have done something wrong. Our inner voice pricks us and makes us sad. Similarly a person, who suffers deep guilt feeling and is sad, may recognize God as a merciful Father.

A wicked sin or a evil deed may distress a person very much. The consciousness of a person's grave sin or misdeeds may make him to lose hope and may even lead to

the thought of or to actual suicide. The sinful person of this type may not recognize the unconditional love of God for him and consequently fail to trust the God of love, the merciful Father. A person who deeply feels his guilt and experiences total hopelessness is badly needed to recognize the unconditional love of God for him irrespective of his grave sin. He needs to accept God's forgiving mercy. Any and every person, whatever his evil deeds may be, can always turn to the loving Father, the merciful God. Like the Prodigal Son in the Bible a sinner can turn to his loving Father with trust. Like the loving and forgiving father in the Biblical story, God the Father is always eagerly waiting for the sinner to return to him. It does not matter to God whatever evil he has done and however grave his sin is.

In the sacrament of confession a Catholic priest communicates this unconditional love of God and his merciful forgiveness. In the name of Jesus the priest says to the repentant sinner, "God in peace; your sins are forgiven." A repentant sinner feels the liberation and burdenlessness in the encounter with God's love; with his mercy and forgiveness. This is the essential of the Sacrament of Confession.

A sinner with faith in God knows that God's love does not conditioned by his sins or his virtues. God's love for a person does not depend on the person concerned by on God himself because God himself is love. God has created man with God's own unconditional love. Whether a man accepts or not, God's love for him is always there. A human father takes great care of his son or daughter with great love. The loving God the Father takes care of his son with deep love and mercy and forgives his wrong doing however grave they may be, even before he pleads for God's mercy and forgiveness. To foster and nourish this faith some remarkable sayings from the Bible are helpful to us. "Do not be afraid", "Have no fear". These kinds of repeated sayings in the Bible are inspiring and encouraging for everyone. Let me give here four concrete biblical quotes:

"I can never forget you! I have written your name on the palms of my hands."
(Isah. 49:16)

"And I will be with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20)

"And you are my friends if you do what I command you." (Jn 15:14) "Jesus spoke to them at once. 'Courage!' he said, 'It is I. Don't be afraid!'" (Mt. 14:27)

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